



## Across the City. Reading the mûlid-s in Egypt

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ANNA MADOEUF

ACROSS THE CITY  
READING THE *MÚLID-S* IN EGYPT

*Abstract* – In Egypt, the mawlıds are at the same time an occasion of feast and pilgrimage, a unique term that identify composite and multiple situations. In Cairo, these celebrations include both provincials and Cairotes, devout persons and onlookers, and they produce infinite opportunities for the blending of different social classes. Urban space is transfigured, crowded, multiplied, overexposed, saturated and it reveals original possibilities of interpretation. Common and private spaces are scrambled into a series of places that assume innovative functions. In this multiplied landscape, sketches and realisations reveal the practices of the participants that share the same places, in a subtle game of proximity and distance, vicinity and separation. In these events, different possible readings of the nature of public space are possible, especially with reference to the practice of a crowded common space. Yet, the mawlıds are not at the core of the city's life, neither symbolically nor politically. Instead, they may be read for their multiple social, spatial, temporal and symbolic marginality.

*Introduction.* – At the beginning of February 2011, while President Mubarak's opponents were occupying Tahrir Square in Cairo, the Egyptian newspaper *al-Dostūr* titled: *Múlid al-burriya midan Tabrir* [*Múlid* for freedom in Tahrir Square].

The *mûlid* (an Egyptian word corresponding to *mawlid-mawalid*, in Arabic: “anniversary”) is a celebration in honour of a saint, organized around the mausoleum devoted to him every year<sup>1</sup>. *Mûlid* literally means “celebration”. However, in the common sense, the word also reminds of a big crowd of people in the same place.

The analogy and the reference in the newspaper *al-Dostûr* do not seem illogical (Mehrez, 2012) in suggesting a comparison between the unprecedented revolutionary protest that was upsetting the square in Egypt and the celebrations traditionally held in the Mûlid. During the XX century, though being different, the Egyptian governments have shared the common feature of declaring illegal any form of protest. In this context, the *mûlids* have always represented rare and recurring legal opportunities of gathering crowds, even if these have often been authorized subject to the constant control of the authorities and, in some cases, even forbidden nonetheless<sup>2</sup>. In agreement with Hannah Arendt’s clue (1989), according to which the public space can be considered as a «*potential space of appearance gathering men in speech and action*», we can see these events as forms of public space: a short lived but – given the cyclic nature of these celebrations- also recurrent one. It is definitely for their subtle and public feature that authorities (even the governmental and religious ones) have always carefully dealt with the *mûlids*, if not with sheer suspicion.

The impossibility to banish or abolish pilgrimages and feasts like the *mûlids* has not prevented authorities from trying to control, thwart, canalize, elude, censure or minimize them so drastically as to get to their complete suppression. Chronologically, the last of these numberless attempts to control this phenomenon – increased in the last period of Mubarak’s regime (Singerman, Amar, 2006; Schielke, 2009) – was reported in the measures taken by the government in 2009, during the avian influenza (H1N1); measures explicitly forbidding the *mûlids*, among which the Zaynab’s in Cairo, being organized just at the time. Although the prohibition was apparently justified by sanitary reasons, the result was that, for the repressive Mubarak’s regime, the risk of an “epidemic” represented mostly an

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<sup>1</sup> These events are very popular in Egypt, above all in Cairo, where several saints belonging to the Prophet’s lineage are worshipped (Biegman, 1990; Hoffman-Ladd, 1992).

excuse to banish gatherings that could raise much more than a simple fear of a mere contagion.

The *mûlids* are feasts and pilgrimages at the same time; a single word that reminds hybrid and manifold situations, reassembled in a uniquely signifying concept. The *mûlids* are moments of excitement and representation; events that put together pilgrims coming from the interior and inhabitants of the capital city, onlookers and worshippers, and offer endless chances to mix different social classes. The city space, *transfigured, multiplied, overexposed, crammed with people*, gets a new look for these rare events, a renewed urban space, almost an unprecedented one, that offers new opportunities of action. The *mûlids* contribute to organize the city and make it a lively space and, at the same time, a space for life; a spiritually and symbolically charged one, but also a space full of a material and tangible presence: the one given by the decorations, the people and the objects. In a public space characterized by the overlapping of practices, the different “ways of doing” of the people taking part in the feast become evident through subtle games of proximity and distance, of nearness and separation, in situations that can be called “commonality” ones. This peculiarity becomes interesting for its plainness, but also for its ambiguous nature, since *what is between two things becomes shared, common to either of them*<sup>3</sup>, a “commonality” that, at a more complicated level seems to include an oxymoron, since it refers to the simultaneity in separating and unifying, that is to the coexistence of the two poles making up their staying together.

<sup>3</sup> Le Robert dictionary

*The mûlids and their marginalization.* – Although some are held in the centre of the ancient part of the capital city (especially Huseiyn and Zaynab’s, located around the big eponym mosques), attended by crowds of *aficionados* (two or three million people every year for the big celebrations in Cairo, according to the local press, very likely to exaggerate it) and included in the Egyptian context for a long time<sup>4</sup>, as an expression not only of religious practices but also of a national and traditional culture<sup>5</sup>, the *mûlids* are not at the centre of

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<sup>2</sup> The state of emergency was uninterruptedly kept during Mubarak’s regime, when only governmental demonstrations were permitted.

the city life. As a topic for surveys, the *mûlids* can also be considered for their marginalization. They actually include different elements of marginality: the social, the spatial, the temporal and the significance one.

From a cultural and social point of view, the *mûlids* are considered “popular feasts”; they reveal a stratified and fairly unequal society, where the subtle differences of class emerge right from the definition of a “basic population” that, though a major one in numbers, can be a comparing criterion to be socially distinguished from, and a condition to stigmatize.

The *mûlid* is thus an expression of “ordinary people”, used to give little importance to their own practice and, after all, rarely taken into consideration by the public opinion. For this reason, carrying out a *mûlid* is a relatively meaningless fact in the common rhythm of the city life, and is quoted in some local newspaper articles at the best. Moreover, the places where the feasts can be carried out are often circumscribed and kept under strict control by the authorities<sup>6</sup>. Even when the celebrations are held in the central districts, these are somehow isolated from the rest of the city, as if in that moment they were places lying in a parallel dimension. The spaces for the *mûlid* are difficult to reach because of the traffic and the fuss created, and they can also be conceived, in the representations of the people who do not take part in it, as fairly repulsive times/spaces, because of the crowd of visitors coming from the outer city, of the transgressions, of the informal, illegal, and marginal practices that are expressed or feared to take place in them. For the Egyptians belonging to mid-high social classes, the *mûlids* often appear as exuberant and socially deplorable practices.

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<sup>4</sup> The worship of Muslim saints was probably established in Egypt by the Fatimid dynasty

<sup>5</sup> The *mûlids* are not only typical Islamic celebrations, also Egyptian Christians have their *mûlids*

<sup>6</sup> The realization of a *mûlid* must be previously authorized and authorities also deal with the areas occupied by the ceremonial tents of the several Sufi brotherhoods (Gilsenan, 1973; Luizard, 1991; Chih, 2000)

These events can be considered from two different points of view: the one of the people taking part in the celebration, and the one of the people who reject it – which makes the definition of a single perspective for the analysis really difficult. As a destination for pilgrims, the *mûlids* attract visitors from the other towns and provinces<sup>7</sup>, pilgrims who fill the space, who settle and camp there, messing it up much more than usual. As a feast, the *mûlids* are occasions for fun, for upsetting rules, for inhibited behaviors (Goerg, 1999; Di Méo, 2002; Fournier, 2009). Furthermore, even if some districts have been dignified by the venerable and venerated saints worshipped there during the *mûlids*, many celebrations are held along the city border (in the necropolis, in the poor districts, in the places attended exclusively by residents). Besides, these events take place in an ephemeral and fleeting time, just one night for the poorest events, more frequently some days and up to a week for the most important ones. Moreover, since their date is determined by the Egira calendar, they involve a period of time that – apart from the month of the Ramadan and the one of the big celebrations in Islam – appears as a “minor”, “subordinate”, “hidden” one. Even the reasons for the *mûlid* existence have been debated, questioning the historical truth about the presence of the saints’ relics and denouncing the apocryphal features of some tombs,<sup>8</sup>. Since the Muslim Reformism in the XIX century, these festive commemorations have been violently attacked and blamed as archaic practices, expressions of a religiosity linked to obscurantism. Such an interpretation is still rather popular and has even grown worse in the name of the orthodox Islam.

Over history, the *mûlids* have increasingly aroused the British authorities’ suspicion, they symbolized underdevelopment in the Socialist period, they were connected to poverty at the advent of Liberalism and, finally, they have always been considered by the mid-high classes as the reflection of the unpleasant and underdeveloped image of the Egyptian society.

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<sup>7</sup> The practice and longevity of the Muslim *mûlids* are connected to Sufism, a very important and meaningful tradition in Egypt.

<sup>8</sup> The traditional saints in Cairo are present also in other places: Zaynab is buried also in Damask, and there are some Husayn’s sanctuaries in the Omayyadi mosque, in Alep, in Raqqa, in Achkelon and in Karbalâ.

Moreover, the scientific research has shown some interest in them quite late and not very often. Among the reasons of this delay there is the fact that the *mûlids*, affected by the modernization of Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s seemed doomed to disappear as residual expressions and, as such, quite uninteresting ones. After all, in the following years, the favour of scientific literature for political Islam has further reduced, if not hidden, the whole of the ordinary and common practices of religiosity, above all the ones connected to the most popular Islam. When unable to forbid them, the power has tried to take profit of these manifestations. The *mûlid* in Luxor, for instance, has been folklorized and advertised as the remains of ancient feasts, a sort of carnival attracting tourists. The *mûlid* in Tanta has been presented by the national press as a “big demonstration supporting the government”. In Cairo, the Sayyda Zaynab’s *mûlid* has been used as a means of propaganda of the DNP (the Democratic National Party, the presidential party of Mubarak’s Egypt) during the political campaigns and the celebrations for the electoral victories, while Husayn’s *mûlid* has been spatially fragmented by the several architectural-urban projects that make it difficult, if not impossible, the organization and the participation in the feast

*The mûlid, staggered places and moments.*- The *mûlids* are all very similar and, at the same time, different events: they overlap the pre-existing space, take it up and create a unique and common climate, an uncommon context made up of successive memories. There are several possible combinations, both in the place and the setting for the feast, but in any case the landscape results “familiarily strange”. Even if it can be described as a “general one”, this is not a fixed landscape but goes on changing, it is never closed neither realized. The feast is like a rhapsody, a landscape tale that starts from a single common theme and from endless varieties of it.

The *mûlids* can be included among the heterotopies suggested by Michael Foucault (2001), counter-spaces of the otherness. After all, it is no accident that analyzing the different forms of these close “elsewhere”, Foucault quotes fairs and theme parks that he considers like “chronic” heterotopies.

A *mûlid* affects the whole environment, giving the involved area a new look. While

arranging and decorating all the elements that characterize the staging of the feast, the *mûlid* eurythmically turns into a real stylistic exercise. Decorations are based on a recurring theme of colours and multicoloured lights.; rings of light bulbs decorate buildings, cross the roads and, flashing, climb to the tops of the minarets of the main mosque; stalls offer pyramids of sweets and dried legumes, orderly and finely arranged; on the moving carts, cornered hats, masks and gadgets pile up, as well as glittering pendants, jewels and amulets; some stalls sell toys and music instruments; swings, shooting galleries, shows and attractions complete the animation. Big tents on wooden frames, made with a thick material and decorated with geometrical patterns, are taken up starting from the sides and the yard of the mosques and the mausoleums, till the web of alleys in the surrounding area. The biggest and most beautiful tents, equipped with lamps and carpets, where their members are hosted and the rites are held, belong to the richest brotherhoods<sup>10</sup>. More informally, simple cloth canopies are unfurled, in order to provide accommodation for the pilgrims and the families camping on the pavements, on the embankments, round the corners of the street, etc.

The feast does not interrupt everyday life, neither breaks it, but highlights it, sometimes in an odd and contradicting way. The urban landscape, being embellished, appears like a continuum, a visual sequence, a circular and permanent universe. The continuity is temporal as well: though characterized by contrasts, rhythms and the routines of the different characters, day and night are equally animated and seem to have a mutual connection. The *mûlid* appears like a hybrid feast, where it is impossible to isolate what involves religion and the holy sphere, and what simply belongs to the joyful and festive one: an urban metamorphosis is what results from these combined elements. The atmosphere of general excitement is highly fervid and exciting, religious and playful at the same time. This is why the *mûlid* does not appear as a chaotic or confused system, but as a work of “spatial redesigning”. Similarly, the *mûlid* is ambivalent, because it includes closed and open spaces, noisy places and places for meditation, empty spaces and full ones, lighted areas and shadowed ones. The *mûlid* moulds a territory, whose core is near the mosques



while at the borders it gathers the districts nearby. During the *mûlids*, the participants follow some routes inside the town, in a context of orientation and disorientation at the same time, in an incessant reshaping of aspirations and drives, in a state of endless unpredictability. The common space is crammed with presences, objects, sensations, shocks, sounds, smells and appeals. But it is empty as well, and for this reason it can be integrated, sympathized with, moulded, blurred. crossed and finally left. The *mûlid* is a walkabout; the Other is present as a multiplicity and as the set of its single units at the same time. The crowd allows the showing off and the disguising at the same time. It is the place where the “sleepwalker” referred to by Isaac Joseph (1984) develops as a metaphor of the character that is learning to become a social individual and feeds his urban practice starting from an immersion in the common space where the crowd has settled in. Aware of the context around him, but, above all, worried about his own route, the sleepwalker is able to see without looking, to cross a scene or a place, to pass unnoticed or hide his presence. The big Zaynab and Huseyn’s *mûlid* in Cairo last about a week, starting in a rather undefined way and inevitably finishing at the dawn of the last night, marking the end of the celebration and representing its triumph. The length of the feast is thus defined and determined, and the awareness of its end turns into a sort of collective impetuosity and excitement, that testify the (implicit) obligation of enjoying the *mûlid* at the best before the announced dissolution.

The feast is unsteady, based on an endless and incessant movement. Its fast rhythm, however, tends to decline by the mid of the last night, starting from a particular moment when the general rhythm, led and driven to the top, is reversed and inverted. This fleeting moment, this elusive minute, cannot be identified in real time, it can be guessed only later on. At the end of the last night, the *mûlid* ends abruptly: it disappears without any chaos neither latent symptoms of decay, and ends up in a sort of general collapse.

*Living in town, living the town.* – Despite the overlapping of different elements of marginalization, stigmatization, invisibility and misrepresentation, or probably just because of them, the *mûlids* can be seen as social mechanisms and spaces of experimentation and adaptation to different ways of doing and of meeting the town, as places of initiation and training for living it together, in Sennett's sense (2003). With very few means and little support, but with many resources, participants fit in situations of density and promiscuity, accommodate places to the variety and the intensification of their functions, arranging every element in a single whole. Although everything takes place simultaneously, even if time and gestures seem confused and overlapping, or classifiable in conflicting registers, the baroque, confused character of the event is nonetheless only an apparent one. People get together and mingle, in every verb tense and mood (I pass by, you sleep, she eats, he sits, we laugh, we march, you speak, they pray, etc.). The protagonists of the *mûlid* are acrobats, tactile beings, who are able to become fluid, shading off their visibility, passing through or brushing a dimension or a scene.

Thus, at the end of the feast, the city easily gets back to normal, and in the last night everyday life starts again at dawn almost on tiptoe (Qassem, 1998). Modesty, responsiveness, initiative, as well as creativity and care for the others and for the places: the *mûlids*, though marginal to the day-to-day life of the city are the opportunity to meet all the ways of living it in a full range, through a combination of urban quality and citizenship.

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